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# ALCOHOL HEALTH AND RESEARCH WORLD

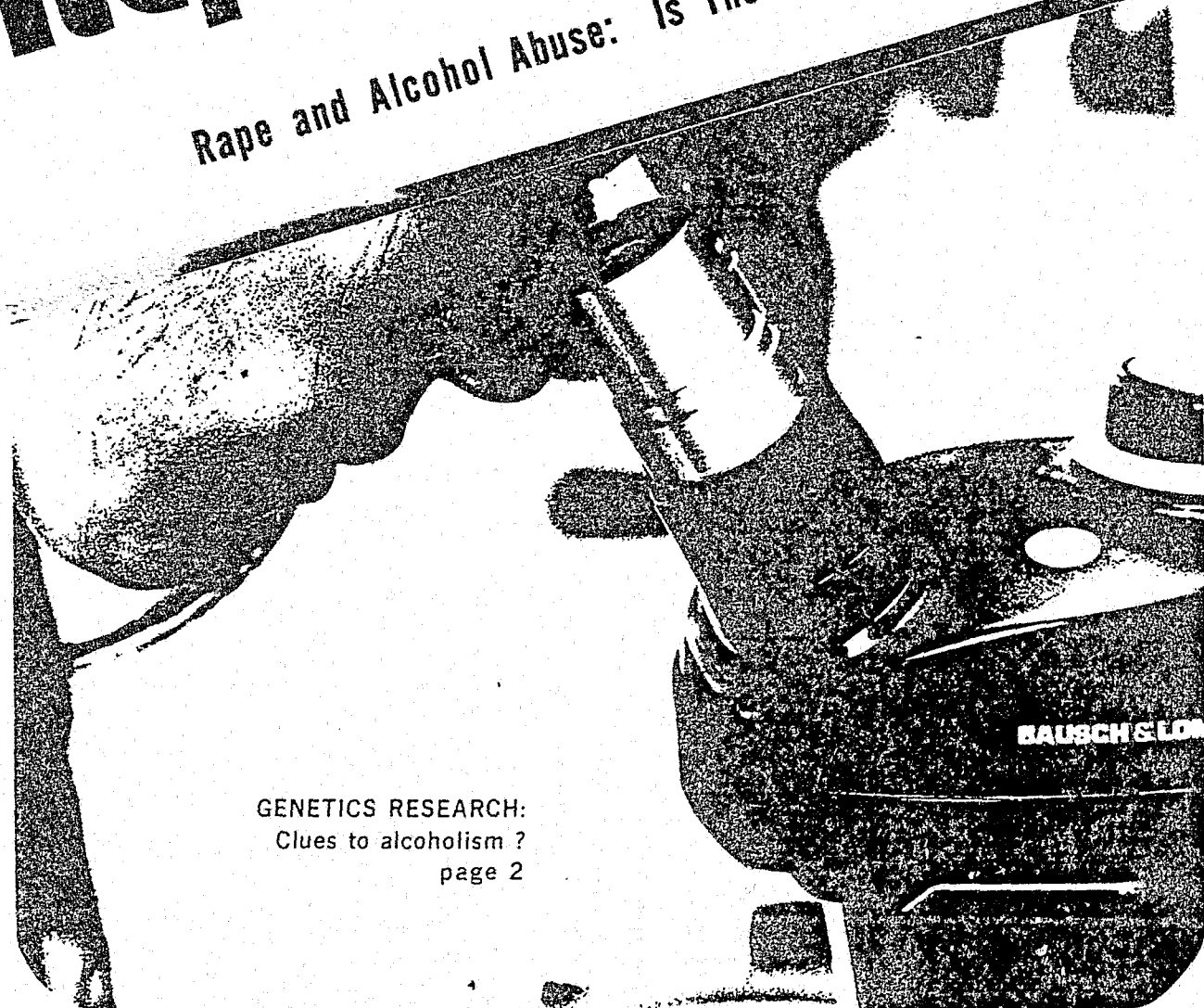
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## Reprint:

Rape and Alcohol Abuse: Is There A Connection?



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# ALCOHOL HEALTH AND RESEARCH WORLD

Alcohol Health and Research World is the quarterly magazine of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) designed to bring you the latest developments in alcohol and health. Alcohol Health and Research World features survey articles and in-depth reports on all aspects of research, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of alcohol abuse and alcoholism. Articles from allied fields are included where there is a special relevance to alcohol.

Authors include noted professionals working in these areas and staff writers using the research capabilities of NIAAA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information. Some recent topics covered are:

- Drug Interaction with Alcohol
- Insurance Coverage for Alcoholism Treatment
- The Interdisciplinary Team
- Social Setting Detoxification
- Young People and Alcohol

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Regular features include book reviews, annotated bibliographies of recent literature on important topics, and letters from readers.

Future issues will feature articles covering developing areas such as fetal alcohol syndrome, special priority populations, and the growing interrelation of alcohol programs and other drug and health programs.

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# RAPE AND ALCOHOL ABUSE:

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## Is There a Connection?

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6/3/99

The possible connection between forcible rape\* and alcohol use and alcoholism in the United States seems to warrant study in view of the relatively large growth in the reported rate of this crime in recent years. Rapes reported in the Nation rose from a total of 17,190 in 1960 to 56,090 in 1975, an increase of 226 percent, making it the third fastest growing "index crime"† in that period behind robbery and burglary (FBI 1975). During the same period, while the U.S. population increased 17.6 percent, according to Census Bureau figures, the national

rate of rape per 100,000 inhabitants increased 174 percent, from 9.6 in 1960 to 26.3 in 1975. The latest figures available from the FBI (1977) show that numbers of rape cases increased by 5 percent during the first three months of 1977 compared to the same period in 1976, giving it the dubious distinction of being the crime with the highest growth rate during the first quarter of 1977.

Rape has been called the "ultimate violation of self" short of homicide (Bard and Ellison 1974), and described as the crime most feared of all by females. It is out-ranked only by murder in the severity of the law's sanctions and the public's ratings of the seriousness of various crimes (LEAA 1975).

Researchers have explored the alcohol connection in rape and have tended to be divided in their findings.

\*The word "rape" will be used subsequently in this article to mean forcible rape, which is defined by the FBI as "the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will in the categories of rape by force, assault to rape, and attempted rape. Excludes statutory offenses (no force used—victim under age of consent)."

† Other index crimes as listed by the FBI include the following: murder, rape, aggravated assault, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft.

One researcher points to a "considerable amount of contradiction and inconsistency among the studies on sex crimes in which the presence of alcohol in rape is examined" (Amir 1967). Another attributes the lack of data to the authorities' frequent overlooking of the relationship between alcoholism and rape (Rada 1975a).

### Studies Assess Link

Nevertheless a number of studies have shed light on the subject, among them a D.C. Crime Commission report in 1966 that found that 13 percent of rape offenders and 6 percent of the victims had been drinking (President's Commission 1966). In earlier research, Shupe (1954) reported that 20 of 42 rape offenders arrested between March 1951 and March 1953 in Columbus, Ohio, had urine alcohol concentrations of .10 percent or more, and Tardiff (1966) reported alcohol present in 31 percent of a sample of rape offenders and in 16 percent of their victims. In addition, a more recent work, referring to a Kinsey Institute study of sex crimes, reported that 21 percent of all sex offenders had been drunk (Berry and Boland 1977). On the other hand, a study conducted 45 years ago found no evidence of alcohol use in rape (Adler 1932).

One often-quoted survey which analyzes the alcohol/rape connection in a large criminal population bears close analysis. This is a Philadelphia study that examined rape data from the files of the local police department covering two periods, January 1, 1958 through December 31, 1958, and January 1, 1960 through December 31, 1960. During these two periods, 646 rape cases were reported, in which 646 individuals were victims and 1,292 were offenders (Amir 1967). The difference between these totals is due to the fact that in some cases there was more than one offender. Information was obtained about alcohol use through interviews with the offenders about their use of alcohol (not a totally reliable source of information, Amir concedes). The presence of alcohol was re-

ported in 34 percent of the cases—in the victim only in 62 cases, or 10 percent of the total; in the offender only in 19 cases, or 3 percent; and in both victim and offender in 136 cases, or 21 percent.

This study further demonstrated a "significant association" between violence against the victim and the presence of alcohol in the offender only. In all cases where alcohol was present in the offender only, force was used upon the rape victim. A significant association was also shown to exist between the presence of alcohol in the offender only and the infliction of a brutal beating upon the victim. Also reported was a significant association between the presence of alcohol and the occurrence of "sexual humiliation," which occurred in 44 percent of the rapes where alcohol was a factor.

### Association of Alcohol and Weekend Rape

Another noteworthy finding in the study was the significant association between weekend rape and the presence of alcohol. According to the study, alcohol was present in 40 percent of 344 rapes committed on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, but in only 28 percent of 302 rapes committed between Monday and Thursday. Amir said he agreed with Wolfgang (1958) on the reasons for the higher incidence of weekend rapes: more leisure time than on weekdays; more alcohol consumption and social interaction; and more purchase of liquor because Friday is payday.

In spite of the relationships between alcohol and rape shown in the study, Amir concluded that "alcohol is not associated with this crime."

A more recent rape/alcohol study focused on the alcoholism rate among 77 rapists committed to Atascadero State Hospital, San Luis Obispo, Calif. (Rada 1975a). The findings showed that 50 percent of the men were drinking at the time of the rape and that 35 percent were classified as alcoholics based on criteria established by the Criteria

Committee of the National Council on Alcoholism.\* Fourteen percent of the 77 admitted that they were alcoholic. Fifty percent or 38 men of the sample were drinking at the time of the crime. Of this number, 43 percent were drinking heavily (10 or more beers or equivalent), 3 percent moderately (5 to 9 beers or equivalent), and 4 percent lightly (less than 5 beers or equivalent). All of the alcoholic rapists were drinking heavily at the time of the offense. Only 22 percent of the nonalcoholic rapists were drinking at that time: 12 percent heavily, 4 percent moderately, and 6 percent lightly.

The researcher cautioned that, while 50 percent of the rapists were drinking at the time of their offense, "this does not point to a direct or causal relationship between the two." The author noted that this study does not take into consideration other factors, such as the presence or absence of alcohol in the victim, the social context just preceding and at the time of the rape, and the possibility that a higher percentage of drinking offenders than nondrinking offenders are caught and brought to trial. Nevertheless, he said, "The high association between the two (drinking and rape) warrants more attention and investigation."

In another study of 122 rapists by the same author, 57 percent admitted to drinking at the time of the offense. Of this group, 35 percent were "drinking heavily" (Rada 1975a).

### Psychoendocrinology Research

Research in the field of psychoendocrinology seems to be opening up new areas of investigation regarding the alcohol/rape question. The subject of aggression is closely related to the issue since there seems to be a general agreement that the "intent of the rapist is more often aggressive than sexual to prove his own masculin-

ity and invulnerability by scapegoating and degrading the victim" (Bard and Ellison 1974). In a recent study, Rada et al (1976) reported that the mean level of plasma testosterone—the hormone of libido in the male—in 52 rapists and 12 child molesters was "significantly higher" in those who were most violent in committing their crime. Hostility rating scores for rapists were significantly higher than the mean for normals, though there was no correlation between individual hostility scores and plasma testosterone levels, the data showed. Rada cited other studies which have also suggested a relationship between higher plasma testosterone levels and aggression and hostility (Persky et al 1971; Kreuz and Rose 1972).

However, the picture is further complicated by the fact that intoxication in chronic alcoholics seems to be associated with decreased plasma testosterone levels in men. Such an association was shown in eight of nine alcoholic men in a study 3 years ago (Mendelson and Mello 1974). The one subject who did not show any significant change in testosterone levels drank very little alcohol. The researchers found no systematic relationship between aggressive behavior and plasma testosterone levels in alcoholic persons. There was a relationship, however, between aggressive behavior in the alcoholic subjects and a rise or fall in testosterone levels from the baseline level.

The researchers note that "change per se" and magnitude of change rather than direction of change appeared to be the crucial factor in the relationship. But they also caution that "direction and magnitude of change may only be associated with intoxication or with aggression during intoxication and not have any direct casual links to either."

The phenomenon of depressed testosterone levels in alcoholics, as noted in the previous study, seems consistent with data obtained from another study (Fabre et al 1973) in which "urinary testosterone glucuronide excretion was significantly greater in alcoholics than in nonalcoholics. . ."

\* NCA criteria for determining that a person is alcoholic: The person admits he or she is alcoholic, or has any three of the following: (1) a history of arrests for DWI, (2) previous arrest resulting from drinking or intoxication, (3) history of drinking with interpersonal and social maladjustment, (4) history of DTs or blackouts, (5) heavy drinking at the time of the crime, (6) history of hospitalization or seeking help for drinking problems.

Because of the seeming inconsistencies in the studies regarding the testosterone issue and its connection with aggression and rape, the need for further information is obvious. Researchers themselves are the first to stress that further data are needed to establish the validity of the association between alcohol use and rape.

At the present state of knowledge in this area, they are still not prepared to fully accept the so-called disinhibition theory which postulates that alcohol decreases ego control, numbs judgement, and releases normally present moral inhibitions. There are some indications that this theory may have relevance for "episodic sexual indiscretion by the normal person" as Rada describes it, but not for the rapist.

Neither is the evidence fully satisfactory for the support of the "direct effect" theory, which postulates that alcohol may produce some kind of a change either in the aggressive or sexual centers of the brain, which then leads to the commission of rape. As Smith (1975) has said "... the vast majority of drinkers (alcoholic or nonalcoholic) seldom if ever run afoul of the law ...". On the other hand, neither does a substantial portion of the alcoholic population engage in criminal behavior either while intoxicated or sober. Smith also noted that alcoholics with psychopathology seem to have the same types of problems as are seen in nonalcoholics with psychopathology. He added: "... it is more correct to say that persons who are more likely to commit rape (and other types of assaultive behavior) are also likely to drink alcohol excessively. On the other hand it is not correct to say that those who are alcoholics are, because of their alcoholism, more likely to commit rape." Smith thus favors the focus on the "criminal subset" of drinkers.

### Further Studies Needed

But before such a subset can be substantiated and certainly before a meaningful alcohol-rape association can be established, there seems to be a definite need for more substantive, accurate, and diverse studies

on the actual presence of alcohol in both rape victims and offenders. Particular scrutiny is warranted in the androgen-and-aggression correlation studies for possible links to and a connection with alcohol. Though rape may be considered a crime of violence rather than sex, it is, as one physician described it, "an act of violence which employs a sexual mode."

It is this combination of factors which makes the issue extremely baffling. Any attempt to find an answer to the question of rape and its connection with alcohol and alcoholism will of necessity have to consider the implications of a number of very complex areas of study: aggression, sexuality, alcohol use, alcohol abuse, and alcoholism.

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